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The Life and Music of John Joseph Heney: Sousa Band Percussionist and Xylophone Soloist

BY MATTHEW H. DARLING

Virtually every lover of musical theater knows professor Harold Hill, the famous protagonist of Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*. But few know that Willson's inspiration for Hill was the real-life music master John Joseph Heney.¹

Heney, who became John Phillip Sousa's Principal Percussionist and Xylophone Soloist, devoted his life to promoting percussion and developing band programs throughout the United States.

Born and raised in San Francisco, California, John Heney began his musical studies at the Horace Mann Evening Grammar School. At age fifteen, one

year shy of the legal age, Heney joined the American Federation of Musicians and became well known in the San Francisco area as a drummer.² His performing career then rapidly progressed through a series of professional bands, including the Sells-Floto Circus Band (1921–24), the Royal Scotch Highlanders (1924–25), the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus (ca. 1925), and the McDonald's Highlanders (1925–26), ultimately leading to John Philip Sousa who, in 1926 hired him at the age of twenty-four as the youngest person to ever play percussion with the Sousa Band. Promoted to Principal Percussionist in 1931, Heney was the last xylophone soloist to perform under Sousa's baton on tour in front of a live audience.³ As Sousa's Xylophone Soloist, Heney is a member of an elite few, all of whom rank as the best-known xylophonists in American history. Others who also held this position include Charles P. Lowe, Martin Schlig, Joseph Green, George Carey, Howard Goulden, and William Paulson.⁴

John Heney performed as Xylo-

phone Soloist for Sousa during the final year that Sousa conducted his band. One evening performance, given Monday August 31, 1931, at Myers High School in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, received the following review, which illustrates Heney's popularity as a performer:

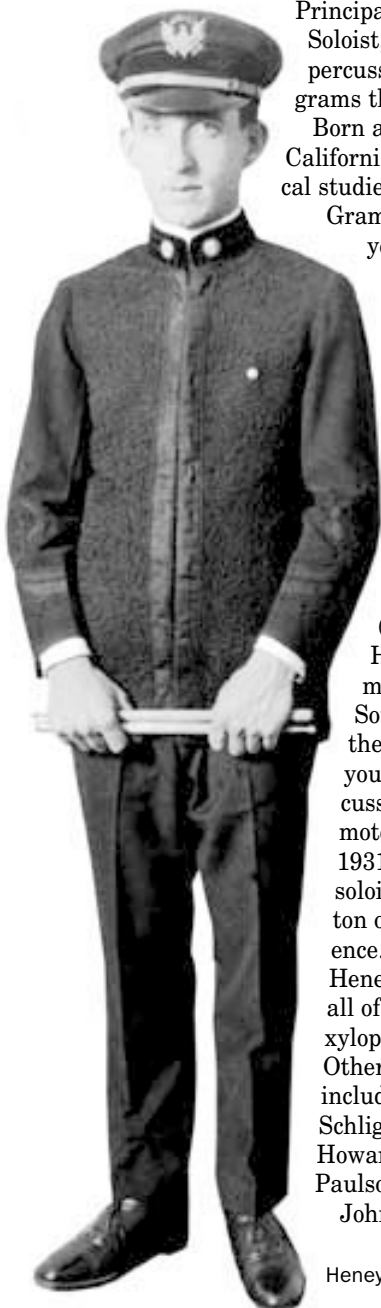
The program was featured with three soloists in the person of Oscar B. Short, trumpet; John Heney, xylophone; and Miss Marjorie Moody, soprano... Mr. Heney completely captured the audience with his xylophone playing. Mr. Heney responded twice to the coaxings of the audience for more and even then the folks were loath to let him go.⁵

As a Sousa Band percussionist, Heney received national attention in advertisements by endorsing Leedy percussion instruments. Leedy's advertisements claimed that they manufactured "the world's finest drummers' instruments," and promoted Sousa's percussion section as follows:

Here are three of the world's most famous drummers and likewise three of the best. J. J. Heney, Frank Holt, and Gus Helmecke comprise the drum section of Sousa's Band and their individual and collective performance measures up to the high standards of musicianship typical of this marvelous organization.⁶

From 1929–31, Heney performed on a five-octave Leedy Monarch Marimba Xylophone, as his instrument of choice.⁷

In 1931, when Sousa's deteriorating health necessitated him giving up leadership of his band, Heney reluctantly resigned and began a second career as a music teacher in Florida. Living in St. Augustine with his wife Margaret, he began teaching music on a regular basis at both St. Augustine and Bunnell High



Heney in his Sousa uniform



Heney with his Leedy marimba

Schools. In addition, as he knew International Sign Language, Heney combined this ability with his musical skills in order to teach music at the St. Augustine School for the Deaf and Blind from 1931–35.

In 1935, Heney relocated to DeLand, Florida, where he began teaching music part-time at DeLand High School. Fortunately, a part-time Band Director and Percussion Instructor position at Stetson University became available that same year, providing Heney full-time work between two schools.

Heney's success as a teacher during the 1930s at DeLand High School is marked by several important events, including a national band festival championship, a building named Heney Hall in his honor,⁸ and by the fact that, by 1940, being a member of his band was "more prestigious than playing on [the school's] football team."⁹ Another significant event in Heney's life during this time was his return to formal music training. While teaching at two jobs, he completed a Bachelor of Arts degree, graduating in 1939 from Stetson University.¹⁰

Also during the 1930s, Heney joined the National Association of Rudimental Drummers (NARD) and served on the National Percussion Committee with such notable percussionists as George Lawrence Stone, Haskell Harr, and William F. Ludwig. Through correspondence with musicians such as C. L. Barnhouse, Herbert Clarke, Raymond Dvorak, Edwin Franko Goldman, William Revelli, William Santelmann, Leonard B. Smith, A. R. McAllister, and Robert Buggert, Heney assisted in refining percussion competition requirements and encouraged the publication of new works for percussion.¹¹

World War II interrupted Heney's teaching career when, on June 8, 1942, he enlisted in the U. S. Navy. Hoping to become a member of the Navy Construction Battalion (Seabees), his plan was thwarted when the Navy discovered his musical talents and assigned him as the Assistant Bandmaster at the Norfolk Navy Yard in Portsmouth, Virginia. Heney later served as the Conductor of the Admiral's Band until his honorable discharge with the rank of Musician First Class took place on January 30, 1945.¹²

After his discharge, Heney returned to teaching at DeLand High School and DeLand Junior High School. He continued his education at Stetson University, where he completed a Master

of Arts degree in 1949.

Throughout his teaching career, Heney's high school bands were extremely successful, claiming fifty-two out of fifty-four possible "Superior" ratings at national, state, and local competitions.¹³ According to retired Admiral Robert Blount, a former Heney student at DeLand High School, "John Heney had extremely high expectations and was a huge disciplinarian. He took the band from scratch and gave everyone lessons on all the instruments."¹⁴

In 1963, Heney resigned his high school position, but he continued to teach at DeLand Junior High until 1967. After his retirement from the DeLand schools, Heney taught percussion at Brevard Community College and Polk County Community College in Florida, as well as two summer sessions (1969 and 1970) and a semester sabbatical replacement at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.¹⁵

In spite of a busy teaching career, Heney always maintained an active schedule as a percussion clinician and performer, appearing at noted high school, college, and university programs across the United States, including the Mid-West National Band Clinic in Chicago and the Interlochen National Music Camp. Heney's most consistent performance outlet was the Daytona Beach Municipal Band, in which he was the principal percussionist from 1932–42 and 1946–68. Heney's last public performance was as guest conductor of the Daytona Beach Municipal Band on July 16, 1978.

Heney's greatest musical contribution was perhaps to the growth of music education in Florida. Together with James Henry Fillmore, Heney founded thirty-two high-school music programs in Florida between 1939 and 1942. According to the Florida Bandmasters Association, Heney founded an additional twenty-one music programs in Florida and was solely responsible for instrumental music becoming a part of the accredited curriculum in Florida public schools. It was this passion for starting music programs across Florida that inspired fellow Sousa Band member Meredith Willson to write *The Music Man* in 1957.

Elected to the American Bandmasters Association in the 1930s, Heney later served on its Board of Directors. He was a founding member of the Florida Bandmasters Association, serv-



Heney performing at Interlochen

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ing as its president from 1938 to 1941, and was inducted into its Hall of Fame posthumously in 1992. Heney was also elected into the Florida Music Educators Association's Hall of Fame in 1973,¹⁶ and was a member of, and officer with, other professional organizations, including Phi Beta Mu and Kappa Kappa Psi.¹⁷ Additionally, the U.S. Government honored Heney as an Outstanding Educator.

After a long career as a nationally recognized music teacher and performer, John Joseph Heney died in DeLand, Florida on September 1, 1978. He is fondly remembered and still respected by former students and associates. Art Himmelberger, a former student of John Heney at the University of Michigan, said Heney was a "very enthusiastic teacher" and "effervescent as an individual." Himmelberger was "totally impressed" with Heney's "speed and technical facility" on the xylophone. "While some of Heney's music interpretations were dated, he was still very demanding and wanted it right."¹⁸

Paul Bierley, noted Sousa authority and band music historian described Heney as a "consummate musician...who set standards of excellence in several careers—percussionist with John Philip Sousa's Band and other premier organizations, one of the finest music educators this country has ever known, composer, author, and clinician...(and) an extremely well-rounded musician," who pursued professional instruction on not only percussion instruments—with William Noltings of the San Francisco Symphony—but also horn, cornet, violin, woodwinds, theory, harmony, counterpoint, and composition.¹⁹

COMPOSITIONS AND PUBLICATIONS

Heney composed, arranged, or transcribed twenty-seven works for percussion instruments. He composed two original xylophone solos with piano and/or band accompaniment: "Spitfire

Galop" and "Bolero Impromptu." He also published an arrangement for xylophone and piano of "The Carnival of Venice." All three of these works are owned by Carl Fischer, Inc. and are currently out of print.

The band accompaniments for "Spitfire Galop" and "Bolero Impromptu" are unpublished and housed in the U.S. Marine Band Library in Washington, D.C. The John Heney Music Collection at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, includes two unpublished arrangements for xylophone and band: Franz Liszt's "Second Hungarian Rhapsody" and Irving Berlin's "Marie." Heney also composed and published a compilation of twenty solos, duets, trios, quartets, and quintets for non-pitched percussion instruments. Many of these works are still available.

In addition, after his tenure with the Sousa Band, Heney wrote a method book for snare called *The Correct Way to Drum* (1934). While antiquated by today's standards, the book is an excellent study in how drummers played in the early part of the twentieth century and has specific information on the interpretation of parts for many of Sousa's marches.

"SPITFIRE GALOP"

"Spitfire Galop," for Solo Xylophone and Piano/Band, was composed by John J. Heney in 1940 and published in a version for xylophone and piano by the Fillmore Bros. Co. in 1940. It is



Premier performance of John Heney's "The Carnival of Venice" with the Norfolk Navy Band, Portsmouth, Virginia, April 9, 1944. Heney is the soloist.

a short work designed by John Heney to feature the xylophonist in a display of rapid diatonic, chromatic, and arpeggiated patterns meant to impress the audience, yet be accessible to the younger xylophone student. Speed and dexterity were important to Heney as evidenced by this quote:

...to play with considerable speed on a xylophone, for instance, and literally fly from low to high sound and at a rate of sixteen to twenty notes a second...listeners do not want to believe it even when they see it or hear it. Therefore the xylophone soloist *has it made*, he is in, he is welcome even before he plays. Speed is desirable on the xylophone more so than the marimba. It is possible for tones to blur, at a high speed, on the marimba—but not on the xylophone.²⁰

“Spitfire Galop” is written idiomatically for the xylophone. With only two exceptions in the coda, virtually all of the passages can be played without double-sticking any of the sixteenth notes. The arpeggiated passages contain no interval leaps larger than an octave, with the vast majority of intervals being thirds and fourths. Excellent examples of this can be found in measures 5–9 (Example 1) and in measures 53–56 (Example 2).

Example 1: “Spitfire Galop” (measures 5–9)
Arpeggiated patterns



Example 2: “Spitfire Galop” (measures 53–56)
Arpeggiated patterns



The scalar and chromatic passages also stay within the range of an octave, and there are no abrupt or unusual key changes. Examples of this can be found in measures 24–27 (Example 3) and measures 75–78 (Example 4).

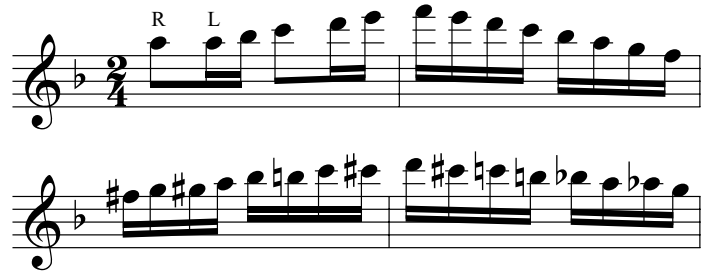
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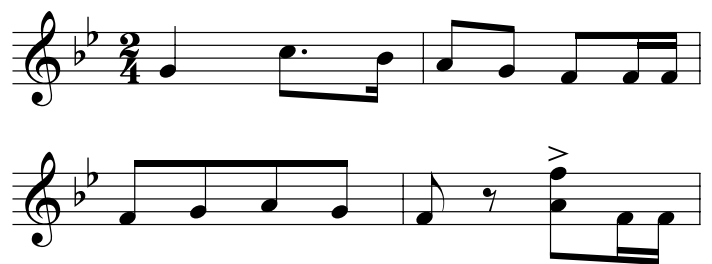


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Example 3: “Spitfire Galop” (measures 24–27)
Scalar and chromatic passages



Example 4: “Spitfire Galop” (measures 75–78)
Scalar passages



“BOLERO IMPROMPTU”

“Bolero Impromptu” for Solo Xylophone and Band was completed on June 10, 1940, and published in a version for xylophone and piano by the Fillmore Bros. Co. in 1941. This work is written for a five-octave marimba-xylophone, and is dedicated

to Heney's colleague and friend, noted percussionist Haskell W. Harr. As with "Spitfire Galop," "Bolero Impromptu" features passages that are idiomatic for the xylophone, composed in such a way that virtually every single-note passage in "Bolero Impromptu" can be played without any double-sticking or awkward body or wrist positions.

An example of Heney's idiomatic composition style is in the opening theme, where, with the exception of the glissandi, the part is played using ascending and descending double-stops in thirds or fourths within the diatonic framework of F harmonic minor. Not a single note is outside the scale.

Example 5: "Bolero Impromptu" (measures 8–12)
Glissandi and double-stop passages

Another example is in measures 25–26, where the part alternates between a diatonic ascending line and a fully chromatic descending line.

Example 6: "Bolero Impromptu" (measures 25–26)
Scalar and chromatic passage

The B theme is first played unaccompanied by the soloist and calls for four soft mallets. The part is not technically difficult by contemporary standards and calls for no independent mallet work. All the voices move in unison, with the harmonic scheme using only the tonic, sub-dominant, and dominant chords. All of

the chords are structured in block form. There are no phrase markings on the music and the only directive is "expressivo."

Heney performs this section with a rubato feel, adding some interesting articulation nuances to the mostly legato phrasing by putting a slight break between each of the chords in measure 55 and measures 61–63. He takes a breath before each four-bar phrase and also re-articulates the second bar of each phrase. The grace notes in measures 50, 54, and 58 are performed more as a "passing-over" of the indicated notes with the mallets than as separate articulations.

Given that Heney originally performed this work on a five-octave Leedy Marimba Xylophone and those instruments are difficult to find, a marimba would be the more appropriate instrument choice for the B theme, given its chorale style. Heney used a marimba during this section on the University of Michigan recording.

Example 7: "Bolero Impromptu" (measures 49–64)
Interpretation of solo B theme

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As stated earlier, Heney felt very strongly about the audience's perception of the xylophonist's dexterity. In the cadenza, Heney did not make an effort to change that perception by writing more melodic and less "speed oriented" material. The cadenza is made up entirely of idiomatic scalar, broken minor-third, chromatic, and arpeggio passages.

The trio begins at measure 101 and is in B-flat minor (harmonic). To me, the trio is the most enjoyable and perhaps creative section of the piece. Not only is it fun to play, it lends itself to some minimal rhythmic improvisation. At quarter note = 160, the tempo indication for the trio is moderately slower than the A theme, though 160 is far from slow. Given the speed of the section, the grace-note figures in measures 101, 105, 109, 111, and 113 happen so quickly that it is difficult to distinguish them from the double-stops that occur throughout the section. Because of the vagueness of these grace notes, one might come to the conclusion that Heney was primarily interested in rhythmic color and embellishment.

Example 8: "Bolero Impromptu" (measures 101–104)
Grace-note figures

TRIO ♩ = 160

p-f 2nd time 8va

Heney's performance of the trio provides evidence that he was going more for effect than following the manuscript or printed part exactly as written. To me, these embellishments provide a light, improvised or, if I may, "impromptu" feel to the solo part. Though it is not written into the music, Heney performs the trio using the traditional hemiola of Spanish music. The band stays in a three feel in the trio.

Example 9: "Bolero Impromptu" (measures 101–102)
Hemiola figure indicated with accents

TRIO ♩ = 160

Heney performed "Bolero Impromptu" throughout his teaching career, most often during clinics and presentations given at various high schools, colleges, universities, and music camps throughout the United States. His only known professional recording of the piece was done with the University of Michigan Symphony Band under the direction of William D. Revelli in November 1968. The album is titled *The Revelli Years: With Famous Artists and the University of Michigan Symphony Band*,

Volume III, and includes Heney performing "Bolero Impromptu," his solo marimba arrangements of "When You and I Were Young Maggie" and "Somewhere My Love," and an arrangement of "St. Louis Blues" by an unknown arranger. This recording was the culmination of a long-time friendship between Revelli and Heney. Other noted Heney performances of "Bolero Impromptu" include a concert at the American Bandmasters Association Convention (1968) and a concert at the Interlochen Music Camp (1969).

As a member of the U.S. Marine Band, Charles Owen (1912–85) performed "Bolero Impromptu" at least twelve times during World War II. Some of these performances were broadcast live by NBC, WBC, and MBC radio. Of special significance is Owen's performance at the Lincoln Memorial on September 2, 1945.²¹ This is the date Japan signed the surrender document on the deck of the battleship USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, marking the official end to hostilities.

"THE CARNIVAL OF VENICE"

"The Carnival of Venice," for Solo Xylophone or Marimba and Piano, was arranged in early 1944, and is dedicated to Heney's daughter, Jessie. Heney and the Norfolk Navy Yard Band in Portsmouth, Virginia, gave the first performance on April 9, 1944. Though requiring the player to have more advanced dexterity, Heney's arrangement remains within the idiomatic writing style he established in both "Spitfire Galop" and "Bolero Impromptu." There are, however, several passages requiring the performer to use rapid and somewhat awkward mallet positioning.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

All those interviewed for this article agreed that John J. Heney was a gifted musician, as well as an extraordinary music teacher and educator. He was entirely energized in performance and was tireless in his motivation to teach. His frequent appearance as an invited soloist and clinician for premier band conventions and music camps demonstrated the great respect his colleagues had for his abilities.

When Heney was inducted into the Florida Bandmasters Hall of Fame in 1992, two of John Heney's former students, who in their own right had successful careers in music, gave tribute speeches to their friend and colleague. Richard Feasel mentioned how Heney was "a strict disciplinarian and a stern individualist, often with rigid goals. There were more than a few (students) who couldn't 'take it' and faded away from the program. However, there were always enough 'hearty survivors' for these goals and accomplishments to achieve state and national recognition."²²

Robert McEmber stated, "I will always remember his deep concern for each of us, his students. He had the unique ability to inspire each and every student to do his or her very best on every occasion."²³

Heney's compositions, such as his xylophone solos "Bolero Impromptu" and "Spitfire Galop," go beyond their original dual purpose as training pieces and professional performance pieces. Indeed, his solos are accessible to young students and entertaining for the audience. With their emphasis on virtuosity, showiness, and wide audience appeal, the solos are a "snapshot" of typical popular concert music in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Emotionally, these solos have

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an appeal Heney almost certainly would not have foreseen, as they embody a work ethic and exuberant energy that characterizes the spirit of a man who devoted his life to his one true passion: *music*.

Spitfire Galop by John J. Heney

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Bolero Impromptu by John J. Heney

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COMPLETE CATALOG OF WORKS COMPOSED, ARRANGED AND TRANSCRIBED BY JOHN J. HENEY

A. Xylophone and Marimba

1. "Bolero Impromptu": Xylophone solo and piano/band, Fillmore Bros. 1940
2. "Spitfire Galop": Xylophone solo and piano/band, Fillmore Bros.

1941

- *3. "The Carnival of Venice": Xylophone/Marimba solo and piano/ band, Fillmore Bros. 1947
- 4. "Second Hungarian Rhapsody": Xylophone solo and band, Unpublished
- 5. "Marie": Xylophone solo and band/piano, Unpublished
- 6. "When You and I Were Young Maggie": Solo marimba, Unpublished
- 7. "Somewhere My Love": Solo marimba, Unpublished

B. Batterie Percussion

- 1. "Bolero": Trio for Snare Drums, Fillmore Bros. 1940
- 2. "Jessie, Johnnie and Mary": Trio for Snare Drums, Fillmore Bros. 1940
- 3. "Admiral Byrd": Snare Drum Duet, Fillmore Bros. 1941
- 4. "Admiral Dewey": Snare Drum Duet, Fillmore Bros. 1941
- 5. "Admiral Farragut": Snare Drum Duet, Fillmore Bros. 1941
- 6. "Admiral Sims": Snare Drum Duet, Fillmore Bros. 1941
- *7. "The Air Express": Quartet (2 snare drums, cymbals, bass drum), Fillmore Bros. 1941
- *8. "The Big Show": Drum Quintet (3 snare drums, cymbals, bass drum), Fillmore Bros. 1941
- 9. "General Grant": Solo for Snare Drum, Fillmore Bros. 1941
- 10. "General Lee": Solo for Snare Drum, Fillmore Bros. 1941
- 11. "General Pershing": Solo for Snare Drum, Fillmore Bros. 1941
- 12. "General Washington": Solo for Snare Drum, Fillmore Bros. 1941
- *13. "The Midnight Express": Snare Drum Quartet, Fillmore Bros. 1941
- *14. "Military Men": Quintet (3 snare drums, cymbals, bass drum), Fillmore Bros. 1941
- *15. "The Parade of the Quints": Quintet (3 snare drums, cymbals, bass drum), Fillmore Bros. 1941
- *16. "The Pony Express": Snare Drum Quartet, Fillmore Bros. 1941
- *17. "A Soldier's Life" (A Rhythm Story): Quintet (3 snare drums, cymbals, bass drum), Fillmore Bros. 1941
- *18. "The Submarine Express": Quartet (2 snare drums, cymbals, bass drum), Fillmore Bros. 1941
- *19. "Captain Blount": Trio for Snare Drums, Fillmore Bros. 1940
- *20. "Dawn Patrol": Trio for Snare Drums, Fillmore Bros. 1940

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